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SUBJECT: SCENE-SETTER: GENERAL PETRAEUS VISIT TO AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador William Wood for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Embassy Kabul warmly welcomes your return visit to Afghanistan. Your presence at the Afghan National Military Academy, s first graduation will significantly enhance this milestone event.

¶2. (SBU) The coming year will take its identity from the Afghan presidential elections, and from increased US military deployments. We continue to face tough challenges in Afghanistan, particularly on the security and governance front. But conditions here are more nuanced than the negative drumbeat coming from the media. Advances in security do not grab headlines the way a spectacular suicide attack does. Progress in development continues. National and international will is holding. But poor governance, corruption, and a growing gap between President Karzai and the international presence, including the United States, are problems.

Elections

¶3. (SBU) Presidential elections already influence nearly everything political here. Karzai's popularity has fallen - dramatically in some areas and among some constituencies. But overall the Asia Foundation poll found that 66 percent of the population still thought the national government was doing a "very good" or "somewhat good" job (compared to 80 percent in 2007). In our view, especially in the absence of a credible opponent, it is Karzai's election to lose. Personal insecurity and corruption are Karzai's greatest vulnerabilities. Karzai installed a new Interior Minister to turn up the heat on both problems. Minister Atmar is working hard, but time is probably too short for dramatic improvement before elections.

¶4. (SBU) Political jockeying between Parliament and the Independent Election Commission (IEC) over the election date is causing a stir. The northern opposition, led by the Speaker of the Lower Chamber, Qanooni, is calling for elections no later than May, ostensibly to conform to the constitution (although they found this position more than six months after the Elections Commission had announced an autumn time frame). We believe that this is posturing for political purposes and, in the end, the Election Commission's (and the Defense Minister, s) preference for a September vote will carry the day based on security and logistical imperatives.

¶5. (SBU) More problematic is the insecurity in the south and east, which is prompting some - including Karzai, other Pashtuns and some RC-South partners - to raise the specter of Pashtun disenfranchisement and the possible illegitimacy of the vote. It is too early to judge the prospects of failure. Although there may be some disruption of voting registration

in the south, we are confident that voting itself will be able to take place, not least because of the arrival of additional U.S. combat brigades, anticipated increases of ISAF partners and the growth of the Afghan army at more than 2500 troops per month. We expect some violence, however.

Security

¶16. (SBU) Seventy percent of the violence continues to occur in about 10 percent of the 363 districts. The Coalition and Afghan security forces have increased our area of control. The Taliban response has been a forced shift in tactics from insurgency to terrorism, to challenge the will of Afghans and the international community. Ordinary Afghans feel less safe as a result of this switch, and as result of rising criminality, especially kidnappings.

¶17. (SBU) Afghanistan will remain short of security personnel for the foreseeable future. Presently there are about 75,000 Afghan army, 82,000 Afghan police, and about 37,000 international military personnel to maintain security. The army is growing at more than 2500 per month and should reach 134,000 in December 2011. The international forces are expected to top 50,000 in 2010. We are working with Minister of Interior Atmar to accelerate reform and training of the police, develop more intelligence-based policing, take action against corruption, and create vetted, specialized police units.

¶18. (SBU) We and the US military are cooperating with President Karzai's initiative to energize renewed community responsibility for security in their locality, without re-creating local militias. The pilot will be in Wardak Province. District councils and local shuras will hire local, but tribally integrated, community guards with elected councils and work with Afghan security forces to vet potential leaders. US Special Forces will train and mentor the guards for local defense within the boundaries of the community.

Governance

¶19. (SBU) Karzai struggles to balance between institutional and traditional informal governance, in an environment of poverty, social exhaustion, illicit power centers arising from decades of political breakdown, governmental incapacity, criminality, and insurgency. Electoral dynamics are further complicating the problem, leading Karzai to make expedient decisions on one hand, but also to appoint top-flight leaders like Atmar to deliver police services on the other. There are no easy answers, and neither Karzai nor the international community can fight all battles all the time. But we can do better.

¶10. (SBU) In Kabul, the focus is on capacity building, creation of a merit-based, professional bureaucracy, and delivery of services to the public. Strong ministries include Foreign Affairs, Defense, Public Health, Education, Finance, Communications, Rural Development, and Counter-Narcotics. The Central Bank is well-led. Interior and Agriculture have new, better leadership. We work closely with those entities. We also work effectively with the other ministries, but mixed agendas or a legacy of weakness slow progress. For instance, the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice suffer from the acute lack of qualified professionals, a history of law enforcement that combines elements of Sharia, tribal, and now Western law, and a lack of national consensus on the way forward.

¶11. (SBU) Outside Kabul, U.S. civilian and military efforts are aimed at strengthening local government at all levels. We work equally with traditional leadership structures, as well as those who gained power through force or wealth during the days of conflict, but have proven themselves ready to cooperate with constitutional government and rule of law. Lack of local consensus, traditionally weak connections

between the capital and localities, long-standing rivalries and distrust among communities, and the presence of illegitimate insurgent or criminal spoilers complicate the task. The goal is responsive, reliable leadership in local communities, which binds them to the capital in a reciprocal way.

Taliban Reconciliation

¶12. (SBU) Reconciliation with Taliban or other insurgent leaders is controversial here. Many welcome the possibility of reduced violence and instability via a possible reconciliation with the Taliban, while others (mainly non-Pashtuns, women, and certain civil society groups) fear a Pashtun deal that could come at the expense of their interests. So far, all reconciliation efforts have been premised on respect for the constitution, which has allowed us to support these initiatives. Although the recent Saudi attempt to begin talks about talks generated much interest, there has been little concrete progress in that or any other initiative.

Narcotics: Positive Trends, Challenge in the South

¶13. (C) Poppy cultivation dropped by 19 percent in 2008, the first reduction since 2005. Just as notable, poppy-free provinces grew from 13 to 18, or more than half of all provinces. Poppy cultivation has died away in the north and east of the country, including in traditionally big poppy cultivating provinces of Badakhshan, Balkh, and Nangarhar. But the narcotics challenge continues in the south, where seven provinces now account for 98 percent of the country's opium, and trafficking is bound to the insurgency. Helmand Governor Mangal is trying to change the game. Together with the UK, we are backing Mangal's initiative to eliminate narcotics cultivation in a 100-square mile area of Helmand through an intensive information campaign, agricultural assistance, and Afghan army-protected eradication. Efforts are underway to deploy a Counter-Narcotics Infantry Kandak with a Poppy Eradication Force into Helmand by January 16 with actual eradication commencing in the first week of February.

International Community and Afghanistan

¶14. (SBU) Relations between the government and the international community are uneven. International support is holding, as demonstrated by the promise of increased deployments at the April NATO Summit in Budapest, increased contributions at the June Donors' Conference in Paris, and support for a larger Afghan army at the September JCMB meeting in Kabul. There is a real improvement in bilateral relations with the Zardari government of Pakistan, although there is some doubt in the Afghan mind that Zardari can get control of all elements of the military and intelligence apparatus there. The UN presence is strong, but SRSK Kai Eide has not yet been able to play the key coordination role hoped for, not least because of insufficient budgetary and personnel commitment from New York.

¶15. (SBU) There are often disagreements between the internationals and the Afghan Government regarding issues of corruption, governance, rule of law, freedom of the press, and other areas. Internationals bridle, for example, when Karzai attributes the bulk of corruption in Afghanistan to international aid donations. The most important gap between the government and the coalition is over the issue of civilian casualties: both sides agree it is a problem that needs to be fixed, but there is not yet agreement on the balance between necessary security operations and necessary protections for civilians. General McKiernan, aiming to minimize civilian casualties, has directed substantial changes to coalition tactics, techniques and procedures.

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